

BON APPÉTIT

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Wine & Spirits



**Canadian
Icewines**

Turns out our neighbors to the north have a way with the frozen grape. Look out, Germany: The Canadian icewine cometh.

BY NATALIE MACLEAN

When most of us hear “Icewine,” we probably think of Germany—of snowy Alps, festive Christmas markets, and holiday toasts made with that most German of dessert-wine delicacies, Eiswein. But these days, we might want to look a little closer to home for the best examples of these rare wines. In recent years, Canada has overtaken Germany as the world’s leading producer—in terms of both quantity and, increasingly, quality—of the lusciously sweet, crisp wines made by pressing frozen grapes.

Which should come as no surprise, considering that the ideal climate for Icewine is one in which winter freezes are erratic, with several mini-freezes before the big chill sets in. Germany and Austria both fit this bill, but Canada’s climate is even better suited to Icewine, particularly in Ontario, which produces 90 percent of Canada’s Icewine. So yes, the very thing that would

obliterate any other grape crop is the dream of the Icewine producer: grapes that have frozen on the vine. In fact, the German word Eiswein means “ice,” or frozen, “wine.”

For optimum picking conditions, grapes need at least half a day of freezing weather to be frozen solid so that they’ll yield concentrated juice that’s high in acidity and sugar. The resulting wines are relatively low in alcohol content (about 9 percent to 11 percent) and are rich and viscous, with balance between acidity and sweetness. Better yet, they pair beautifully with holiday menus, particularly with foie gras or meats cooked in fruit reductions. Much like a French Sauternes, the Icewine’s sweetness acts as a foil to rich flavors or can temper the saltiness of a cheese course.

COLD VERSUS MOLD

The difference between Icewine and other sweet wines, such as French Sauternes and Hungarian Tokaji, is a matter of cold versus rot. While both are late harvested, many traditional dessert wines depend on the action of a friendly fungus called *Botrytis cinerea*—commonly known as “noble rot”—to achieve their high sugar content. This mold pierces the grape skins, allowing water to evaporate and thereby concentrating the juices. While the aromas and flavors of such wines are alluring, the fruit can be hard to identify. Whereas in Icewine, fruit flavors and acidity are bright and balanced.

You’ve probably noticed that Canadian Icewines have started popping up on the better restaurant wine lists and in upscale wine shops. However, while some 75 Canadian wineries are now producing Icewines, these honeyed gems still fall into the special-occasion category. Half-bottles typically start at around \$50, and for good reason. Icewine production is a difficult, risky business—and not a pretty one: Rows of brown shriveled marbles hang from brittle, leafless vines. The longer the grapes stay on the vine, the larger the risk of losing the fruit to birds, animals, and severe weather. Canadian law prevents picking grapes for Icewine before November 15, and stipulates that the grapes must be picked and pressed at a temperature of -8 degrees C (17.6 degrees F). Grapes are usually picked at night so that the fruit doesn’t melt, which would dilute the concentrated juices. If melting occurs, the wine must be labeled as “late harvest” rather than “Icwin.”

One wonders if it wouldn’t be easier to skip the keen cold, pick the grapes in October, and stuff them in a freezer. In fact, some producers take that tack in California, Australia, and other regions where the temperatures don’t get cold enough to freeze grapes naturally. Wineries like California’s Bonny Doon Vineyard produce an ersatz version of Icewine they call icebox wine or, more elegantly, Vin de Glacière. Grapes are picked in the fall, then artificially frozen using a process known as cryoextraction. However, these freezer wines lack the intensity and complexity of the real thing, to say nothing of the gorgeous color.

RED, WHITE, AND SPARKLY

Most Canadian Icewines are golden in color and made from the Vidal Blanc grape, well suited for Icewine because the grapes ripen late and their thick skins protect them from disease and freeze-thaw cycles. Vidal Blanc often produces highly aromatic fruit, with an acidity that balances the sweetness in the finished wine (think luscious wines that taste of mango, peach, honeysuckle, and jasmine). Some Canadian vintners are using Riesling to make ice-wine; while the grape is not as hardy as Vidal Blanc, it tends to yield elegant wines with more vibrant acidity and hints of minerality and citrus aromas. Several wineries, including Inniskillin, Magnotta, and Pillitteri Estates, are making sparkling Icewines. These blend refreshing fruit flavors with).

palate-cleansing acidity and effervescence. Some see this as the ultimate blend of the world's two most luxurious wines, but others find the combination of fizzy and sweet odd.


Not all Canadian versions of ice-wine are white. In the past few years, vintners have been experimenting with red varietals with some surprising results. In 1995, Inniskillin made its first red Icewine from Cabernet Franc grapes. In fact, grapes as varied as the versatile Merlot and finicky Pinot Noir are producing deep, ruby-toned Icewines with notes of strawberries and raspberries. However, red Icewines often lack the concentration of their white counterparts. Red grapes, such as Cabernet Franc, naturally have lower acidity than white grapes like Riesling. But these wines can work well with a cheese course particularly with blue and cheddar cheeses, and are exceptional with chocolate desserts.

THE CHILL FACTOR

Red or white, still or sparkling, serve ice-wine chilled; an hour or two in the fridge will allow it to reach the ideal drinking temperature of 45 degrees. Since these wines are intense in flavor, a half-bottle will serve six to eight people about two ounces apiece. But just because the pour is small, the glasses don't have to be. Try using a regular white-wine glass, which should give you enough room to swirl the wine, enjoy its aromas, and make a toast with this festive elixir. •

ICE IS NICE

A buyer's guide to seven exceptional Canadian icewines. (Bottles are 375 milliliters.)



Jackson-Triggs 2004 Vidal Icewine, Niagara, Ontario (\$20) Notes of orange peel and nectar.

Colio Estate Wines 2004 CEV Vidal Icewine, Lake Erie North Shore, Ontario (\$36) A rich, viscous wine with notes of honey and apricot.

Château des Charmes 2004 Vidal Icewine, Niagara, Ontario (\$40) Luscious and full-bodied with notes of honeysuckle and pineapple.

Royal DeMaria 2004 Vidal Icewine, Niagara, Ontario (\$40) Loaded with layers of baked apple, quince, pear, and melon.

Reif Estate Winery 2004 Vidal Icewine, Niagara, Ontario (\$46) Redolent of apricot, mango, and peach.

Mission Hill Winery 2003 S.L.C. Riesling Icewine, Okanagan, British Columbia (\$85) Bright notes of ripe mandarin orange with balanced acidity.

Inniskillin 2003 Sparkling Vidal Icewine, Niagara, Ontario (\$90) Ripe tree-fruit flavors with a zesty, refreshing effervescence.

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